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DHAHRAN SENDS
PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: PGOV PREL SCUL SA

SUBJECT: INTERNET JOURNALISM CHANGING PERSPECTIVES AMONG EP
SHI'A

Classified By: Consul General John Kincannon for reason 1.4 (d).

¶1. (C) Hussein Al-Alak, a Qatif-based journalist for online Rasid News Network (www.rasid.org; the premier Internet forum for Saudi Shi'a), discussed with PolOff and PAO on June 20 the growing influence of Internet journalism among the Shi'a. Because the government has permitted much greater freedom of expression over the past five years, Al-Alak explained, he and his fellow online writers feel comfortable having their true names, e-mail addresses, and photographs associated with their articles. "In the past the government might have thrown you in jail for saying something they don't like. Now they just harass you a bit by calling you, having you come in and sign some papers, et cetera. But we are willing to endure this harassment for the principles of openness and dialogue." Al-Alak acknowledged that there was a ceiling to freedom of expression, namely "criticism of the ruling family." He said that he and his colleagues used Al-Watan and Al-Riyadh newspapers as barometers of the permissible, noting that they enjoy a degree of protection which allows them to adopt more serious, critical editorial policies than other Saudi-based newspapers.

¶2. (C) Al-Alak observed that the criticism Rasid writers faced from their readers in the Shi'a community was often intense. Yet sometimes, he noted, readers' views defied the conventional wisdom and produced an unexpected picture of the opinion of the "Shi'a street." Al-Alak offered as an example an opinion piece he recently published on Hamas. The piece, titled, in loose translation, "Screw Hamas," criticized Hamas for various actions that, Al-Alak argued, were supportive of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi and therefore against the Iraqi people. "It was a very provocative article, and I thought the reaction would be so fierce that I opened it by warning the readers that some would find it a dangerous argument." Instead, Al-Alak noted, readers' comments were mostly positive. Even more astounding, Al-Alak continued, were the results of an online poll Rasid conducted about Hamas. The poll asked respondents, "Given the recent position of Hamas on Zarqawi, do you consider Hamas: 1) A jihadi group; 2) A terrorist group; or 3) Don't know?" According to Al-Alak, seventy percent of respondents considered Hamas a terrorist group, with the rest divided between the remaining two answers. "The results represent a sea change in opinion," Al-Alak continued. "A few months ago very few in the Shi'a community would have considered Hamas a terrorist organization."

¶3. (C) Al-Alak said that the "guys" who manage Rasid do not reveal their identities online, partly because of concern about an SAG crackdown but also to avoid personal attacks for Rasid's editorial policy. The editors, Al-Alak claimed, believe strongly in the importance of debate and freedom of

expression and publish articles representing diverse viewpoints. (Note: We think it likely that the identities of at least several of Rasid's managers are open secrets among Shi'a activists, although they are reluctant to discuss the issue with us. One contact said that several of the managers were U.S.-based. End note.)

¶4. (C) Comment: Rasid News Network seems heavily used by all politically active Shi'a. Once a story gets posted to Rasid, almost all our Shi'a contacts seem to know about it. There are reports about most major incidents affecting the Shi'a community on Rasid, and the network covers ongoing political developments like meetings of Qatif's municipal council as well. The opinion pieces do represent a range of views, there is ample opportunity for readers to comment, and the site often conducts polls on political questions. While it is impossible to know how representative readers' comments and poll results are of the Saudi Shi'a community at large, we find Rasid to be a far better gauge of Shi'a opinion than any other media source. We have reason to believe that the SAG also finds Rasid a helpful source of information on Shi'a activities and opinions. Rasid has posted stories about several Consulate activities, and in two cases the SAG has made inquiries with our hosts and/or reprimanded them for inviting us without notifying the SAG. End comment.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)
OBERWETTER